

Cambria Heights – 227th Street Historic District

Borough of Queens

Proposed Action: Calendared August 10, 2021; Heard September 14, 2021;
Propose for Designation June 28, 2022



East Side of 227th Street, LPC, 2022

The proposed Cambria Heights – 227th Street Historic District stands out in its neighborhood and throughout New York City as a remarkably cohesive and distinctive group of row houses built in the Storybook style. Designed by architect Andrew A. Marjey, the district’s 50 houses remain exceptionally well-preserved more than 90 years after their completion, in 1931, by their developer Wolosoff Brothers.

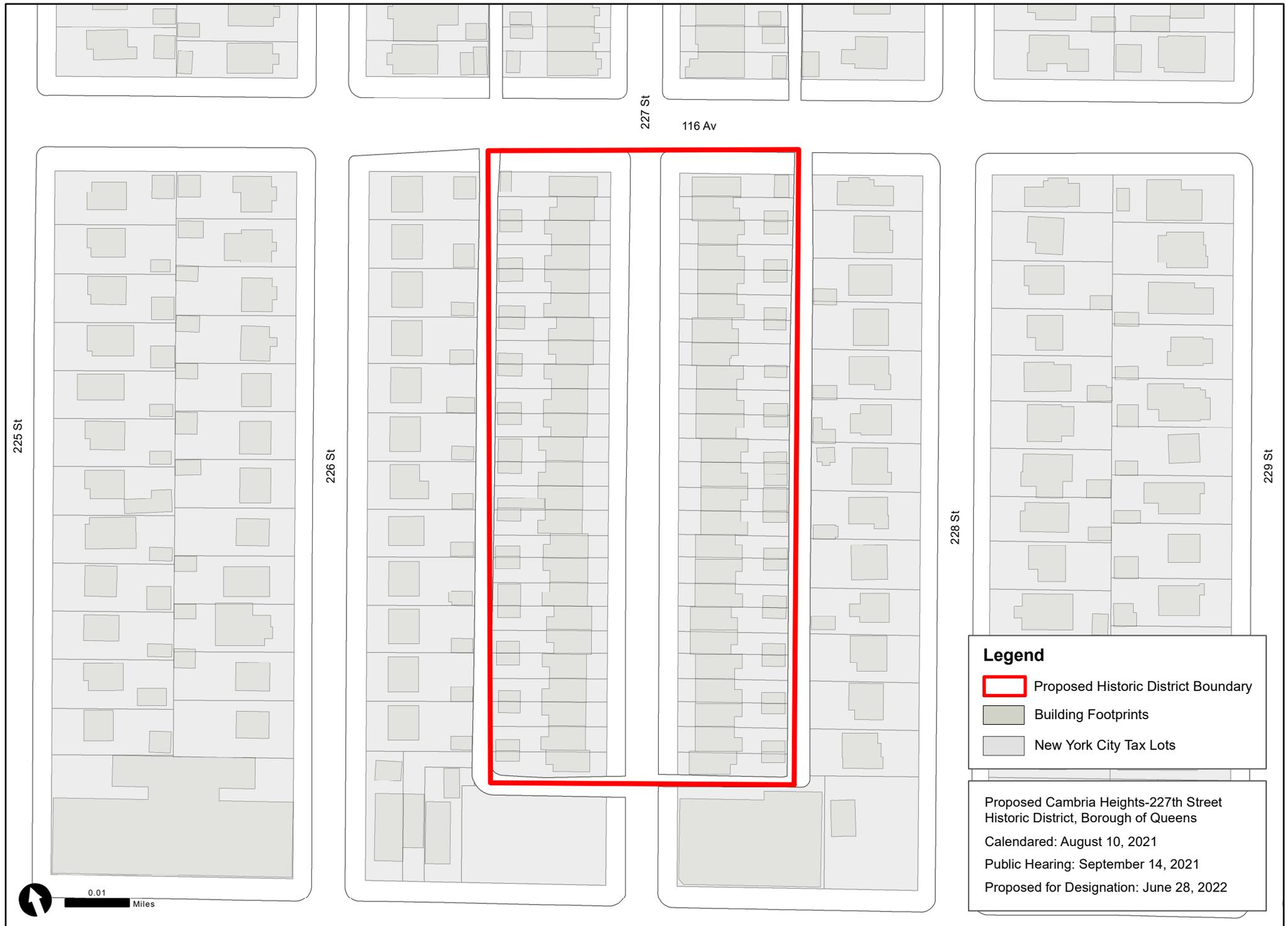
Located in southeastern Queens adjoining the Nassau County border, present-day Cambria Heights was farmland worked in part by enslaved people until the statewide abolition of slavery in 1827. It remained rural into the 1920s, when the Cambria Heights was first widely used. During that decade, Cambria Heights and its neighboring communities experienced a boom in suburban middle-class house building made possible by increasing automobile ownership and the construction of lavish new bridges and highways making farmland more accessible from the City and new recreational amenities farther out on Long Island.

Sons of Russian Jewish immigrants, Leon and Alvin Wolosoff began building houses in Queens and nearby Hempstead by the late 1920s. In early 1931, they acquired an enormous swath of land in southeastern Queens for St. Albans Lawns, intended to be their largest development ever containing 600 homes. Ultimately, the 50 houses comprising the historic district would be the only portion of St. Albans Lawns completed. In planning 227th Street, the Wolosoffs and architect Marjey adapted a model previously used in Jackson Heights rooted in English Garden City concepts. Common driveways behind the houses provide access to private garages, relegating automobiles to the block interiors and allowing for the continuous front yards that gave St. Albans Lawns its name. These yards remain remarkably intact and uninterrupted by walls and fences, preserving much of the street’s original appearance.

Primarily associated with California, where it flourished as a small-house style in the 1920s, the Storybook style is distinguished by its playfulness, incorporating an “exaggeratedly plastic ... interpretation of medieval forms; [the] use of artificial means to suggest great age; and ... that all but undefinable quality known as ‘whimsy.’” Colors are bright, proportions and features stretched and exaggerated, and materials freely mixed and randomly applied to suggest weathering and patching over the centuries. Storybook-style features of the historic district include the houses’ bowed and stretched entrance vestibules with flared roofs and gables piercing the parapets; brightly colored red, blue, and green slate shingles; pastel-colored diamond panes; artificially aged facades, seemingly patched over time with stone blocks and random groupings of bricks; and picturesque chimneys of stucco, brick, and stone reaching far above the roofline. Set behind deep front lawns, these imbue the street with the stage-set quality typical of the Storybook, a style influenced more by the fantasy architecture of fairytale illustrations and movie backdrops than by historical precedent.

During 1931, frequent advertisements in local newspapers emphasized the houses’ suburban setting on “one of the highest elevations and healthiest locations in Queens County,” just “a short ride from Jones Beach, Long Beach, and the Rockaways.” Their modest price was payable on a monthly plan similar to the cost of rent and included a private garage, a major expense for city car-owners at the time. The *Brooklyn Eagle* reported of St. Albans Lawns that “Here, for one place in the world, old-fashioned comfort is to be found, combined with all that is modern, labor-saving, and artistic.... Everything throughout these homes breathes of fine workmanship and materials. Yet they are homes that can be bought on an income of \$50 weekly.”

Into the 1950s, all of the district’s homeowners were white middle-class families. The history of 227th Street after that time reflects the broader changes occurring in the neighborhood as it changed from almost entirely white to a predominantly Black community starting in the 1960s. Although Black families initially faced considerable hostility from white Cambria Heights residents as they began purchasing homes there, it is now one of the city’s major African American and Afro-Caribbean communities, home to many Haitian Americans and families from Guyana, Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago. Today, the proposed Cambria Heights – 227th Street Historic District is one of the architectural highlights of its neighborhood and the Borough of Queens. Unusual among the city’s row house districts for its whimsical, imaginative Storybook-style facades set behind deep front lawns, it evokes the early days of Cambria Heights’ development into a new suburban landscape promising a fairytale life during the Great Depression.



Legend

-  Proposed Historic District Boundary
-  Building Footprints
-  New York City Tax Lots

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